

12 DAYS OF
Mandy Reno

Ren@Vations Inc. * 2

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Chapter 1



December 5

The festive mug crashing to the vintage black-and-white tiled floor of the Clementville Café was the last straw. And it wasn't just a mug. It was a mug filled with hot chocolate. Peppermint hot chocolate.

As if plain hot chocolate wasn't sticky enough.

Mandy Reno was done.

Aunt Roxy, owner of the café, and her daughter Darcy rushed from the kitchen at the sound. "Are you okay, sweetie?"

Mandy looked up at her from her position on the floor, cleaning up the mess. "Something tells me it's just not my day."

The sympathy on Roxy Reno's face was almost enough to let those tears fall, but Mandy could be an adult about this.

Lawyers don't cry. Do they?

The strap of authentic sleigh bells pealed out their welcome before she could elaborate. She'd stayed late the night before to help Roxy and Darcy deck the café last night,

and she'd been all about anything Christmas. The bells made her laugh. The poinsettias and twinkle lights did something to the region of her heart that only happened at Christmas.

Today?

Today the happy sound irritated her.

“Hey, Mandy.”

Her cousin Lisa Reno and her fiancé Nick Woodward approached the counter.

“Everything okay back there?” Lisa chuckled, then stopped as soon as she saw the dark look on Mandy's face. “I guess not?”

Mandy finished mopping up the sticky residue that she would be avoiding all night if she didn't get it up now. Things were picking up with the early supper crowd. Spray cleaner would have to do.

“Hey, guys.” Putting the cleaning products under the counter and changing into a clean apron, she put on the best smile she could, glad there were no mirrors to see her face, and glad she didn't have to put on a front for family. Mandy did not have a “poker face.”

She looped the long apron strings around her and tied them in front. “Table or booth?”

Nick looked around the dining room and then at Lisa, who nodded. “How about the counter?”

Mandy gestured to the counter in front of her, pulling out paper place mats and cutlery wrapped in napkins. She knew why they were sitting at the counter. Lisa was going to get the scoop out of her, whether Mandy wanted to talk about it or not.

Lisa climbed on the stool, smiling—she was always smiling these days, seemed like—and winked at Mandy. “Sounds good. Christmas is coming, and we need to compare

notes for the big Reno celebration at Grandma and Grandpa's. I'm determined to finish shopping this week."

"Like that's going to happen." Nick squeezed his arm around Lisa's shoulders, causing her to laugh.

There it was. In the pit of Mandy's stomach. The empty feeling that had plagued her all day. She turned away to fill water glasses, and under her breath said, "What's even the point?"

"Did you say something?"

Mandy closed her eyes. *Did I say that out loud?*

She turned, heaving a sigh. "It's nothing."

"When are Uncle Ed and Aunt Christine getting home?"

Mandy set the glasses of ice water in front of them and threw up her hands. "Isn't that the question of the day?"

Lisa's brows dipped, confusion written all over her face. "What do you mean?"

"The devastating mudslide in Brazil was in the same area as the hospital they are helping to build and get organized." Mandy's lips settled in a thin line. "The airport's up and running, but Mom and Dad feel like they need to stay there and help."

"Wow." Lisa's eyes rounded. "We were all relieved when we knew they were okay, but I hadn't thought of that. I guess it's pretty clueless of me to think they could just fly home in the aftermath of that disaster."

Mandy waved off her sympathy. "I know, and I understand why they're staying. Really. If I were in their shoes, I'd do the same thing. They're staying for people who lost everything, and I have so much that I didn't even think about." She tried to put on a happy face. "So, Christmas may look a little different this year without Mom to work her Christmas magic."

She turned to check the door when she heard the bells ring once again, seeing who was entering the restaurant.

“Earth to Mandy.”

When Lisa’s voice filtered through her thoughts, she felt the involuntary smile on her face. “Hmm?”

Lisa chuckled, bringing Mandy back from wondering why in the world Clay Lacey had not been snatched up.

Somebody was missing out on a great guy.

DIRECTING traffic for the fender-bender at the far end of Crittenden County that included a school bus and an extra-wide soybean head attached to a combine harvester was just one more thing to add to Sheriff Clay Lacey’s day. Escorting the funeral procession of a long-time resident took up another chunk of time, and supervising the road crew putting up the Christmas lights around the courthouse, yet another.

It was Friday, and Clay was tired.

When he drove through Clementville on his way home from the bus incident, the Clementville Café beckoned.

Pulling up to the brightly lit café, his heart lifted a little. The bell jingled as he opened the door. Looked like since yesterday someone had replaced the regular bell with a sleigh bell strap, giving the sound a definite Christmas vibe. Between that, the staff wearing Santa hats, and the twinkling lights strung on everything, the place defined Christmas cheer.

Garland and greenery lined the windowsills, and there was a huge poinsettia next to the cash register. He lifted a hand to greet Roxy, behind the counter, and Lisa Reno and Nick Woodward, who’d turned at the sound of the bells.

“Hi, Clay. You by yourself tonight?” He looked down, surprised to see Mandy Reno standing before him, picking up a bundle of silverware and waiting for his answer.

“Just me. How are you, Mandy?” Usually, Mandy was a

take-no-prisoners kind of waitress. She was quick, intuitive, and always ready to make suggestions. Tonight, she didn't quite seem herself, Santa hat notwithstanding.

"I'm good. Roxy was nice enough to give me a shift so Darcy could drive into town." She smiled briefly and seated him at a small table, handing him a menu. "Tonight's special is the fish fry, and we have chocolate fudge pie and ice cream in desserts, along with our usual apple and cherry pies."

Something was off.

Clay had known her all her life, and a subdued Mandy was not what he expected this close to Christmas. He narrowed his eyes and looked at her until she raised her eyes to his. "Everything okay?"

Mandy met his eyes briefly, her color rising. "Sure." She took a deep breath and looked away for a split second. "Mom and Dad won't be able to get home for Christmas."

Was that a gleam of tears in the eyes of the girl he'd come to think of as a "warrior princess"?

"I'm sorry to hear that." What could he do? He'd never felt quite as helpless in the face of female tears.

She sniffed and shook her head, giving him what he thought was her brave face. "I'll be fine. I just talked to Mom before I came in to work, so it's still fresh." She shrugged, quietly chuckling. Clay knew she was trying to tamp down emotions. "I'm too old to worry about Christmas. As long as the littles have a good time, I'll live."

"The 'littles'?"

She grinned. "That's what I call my nieces and nephews, collectively. There are four of them, you know, and one on the way. Sometimes it's easier to lump them in one category."

They laughed together.

"Your family's been prolific, that's for sure." Clay smiled, noticing the way her dark hair swept back from her face. Until

recently, he hadn't thought of her as a young woman. Five years his junior, she was always Lisa's cousin, or Cassie and Rob's little sister. A kid.

"Yeah, well, I love them to death, but I'm certainly in no hurry to add to the mix."

"You've got plenty of time." He looked down at the menu, not seeing it. For some reason, he felt uncomfortable with the turn in the conversation.

"Not to hear my sister talk. By the time she was my age, she had one child and one on the way." She put a hand on her hip. "Now let me ask you, is twenty-four considered an old maid these days?"

His heart jolted a little. She was twenty-four? That's like—like a grownup.

He looked up at her. Where did little Mandy go? And who was this beautiful young woman before him?

"I would say definitely not."

"Thank you, kind sir." She curtsied and smiled down at him, making his whole week. "Now, what can I get you to drink?"

Something cold, for sure.

MANDY WAS PREOCCUPIED when she came back to the counter to pour Clay's tall glass of sweet tea.

She glanced across the dining room to the table for one. She'd always found the sheriff handsome, and he didn't look all that old. What was he? Twenty-eight? Twenty-nine?

Not exactly ready for Social Security.

His blond hair had just enough curl to be interesting, although he kept it so short, she could hardly tell there was any. The five o'clock shadow wasn't bad, either. The fact that

he was Lisa's ex didn't play into how she thought of Clay. Honestly, she loved Lisa's fiancé, Nick, but before he came on the scene she couldn't understand why Lisa didn't fall for Clay. The poor guy pursued her long enough. Didn't that give him "dibs"? And did he still carry a torch for Lisa?

Not my problem.

The overflowing sweet tea running down her hand got her attention, and she shook her head, irritated. What was wrong with her? She emptied the glass and rinsed her hands, then fixed another one so it wouldn't be sticky. That gave her enough time to tamp down the blush she was sure had flamed onto her cheeks.

Mandy walked to his table, setting his glass of iced tea in front of him. "Here you go."

"Thanks." He smiled gently.

"You're welcome. Have you decided what you want?"

"I'll go with the flow and order the fried fish dinner." He gave her the menu and shook his head. "I don't know why I look at the menu. I should have it memorized by now."

"One of these days Roxy and Darcy are going to throw you a curve ball."

"Anything they cook is going to be good, so bring it on." He laughed.

Her heart felt a little lighter. She was still aggravated at her parents and the world in general, but talking to Clay was fun. When she worked as a waitress in the summer, the café had usually been busy when he came in, but tonight, for a Friday night, it was slow.

Her mind was divided between why she'd never really given him the time of day, except in passing, and his order.

Stop it, Mandy. He probably still thinks of me as a kid. Most people around here do. Get it in gear, girl.

"Do you want the works? Beans, slaw, hushpuppies?"

“You bet. It’s been a long day.”

“Tell me about it.”

Clay looked up at her, his face deadpan. “I would, but then I’d have to shoot you. Ongoing investigations, and all.” He lifted one eyebrow.

“Very funny.” She found herself smiling back at him, feeling the heat rise again. She needed to get away before she did something stupid like spilling his drink on his lap.

Great, Mandy. Put that out into the universe.

“I’ll get your order in, then get you some more tea.”

“Perfect. I was thirstier than I thought.”

Mandy turned to add Clay’s ticket to the order wheel, then grabbed his glass and filled it, adding a little ice to the freshly brewed iced tea.

“Thanks.” When she handed him the glass, glad to have it out of her jurisdiction, he took another sip and looked her in the eye. “I’m sorry you got bad news.”

She shouldn’t talk about family matters, but she needed to vent. Lisa was too involved with her engagement to be much help, and her best friend Caryn was so enthralled with her new boyfriend Ben that she was only seeing rainbows and unicorns.

Love. What was that all about, anyway? But here was Clay. She’d known him, literally, all her life. Solid, dependable, seeming to have all the time in the world, Clay. Maybe he would be a good sounding board.

“It’s hard to imagine having Christmas without Mom.” Even as she said it, she thought she sounded like a cranky teenager, which is probably how Clay looked at her. “Anyway, it’ll be fine. I’ll be fine.” She took a deep breath and raised her eyebrows as if that would lift her sagging spirits as well.

“Ed and Christine are in South America, aren’t they? Didn’t they have some kind of natural disaster close to them?”

Mandy nodded. “Mudslide. Mom sent pictures. It was

horrible. Mom said so many lost their homes in the mudslide that they opened up the new hospital early, as a shelter, housing the homeless as well as the sick and injured.”

He shook his head in sympathy. “That’s rough.”

“They could come home, but they’re needed there.” She felt her resolve crumbling and pulled herself up.

Oh no you don’t. Don’t you dare cry.

“And they’re probably just as upset as you are.” Clay scrunched his nose.

Why was he being so sensible? Didn’t he know that she wanted sympathy, not sensibility?

“I suppose.” Grudgingly. “Mom sounded kind of sad, but she was hiding it well. It just won’t be the same. I mean, this could be my last Christmas living at home, and now I’m not even doing Christmas.” She held her hands in front of her. “Who knows where I’ll be this time next year?”

“Where are you staying?”

“At my grandparents’ house. My parents left a few weeks before I went back to school, so when I came home on weekends, it was easier to stay at my grandparents’ house than rattle around in that big house by myself. I never thought about being afraid in my own house until I stayed down that lonely lane for a few nights by myself. At first, it was an adventure, and then, when we had a thunderstorm that knocked out the power, not so much.”

She twisted her lips. “On top of that, it hasn’t felt right not helping Mom drag out all the decorations. I may complain every year, but it’s always been like clockwork. We have Thanksgiving, then the next day take advantage of the Black Friday sales. After we come home and take a nap, we spend the next day and a half switching the décor in every nook and cranny from pumpkins to candy canes.” She shrugged. “Not this year. Christmas is pretty much ruined.”

Clay tilted his head. “You can’t ruin Christmas, can you?”

She looked at him. “I know Christmas will come and go whether I’m ready for it or not. It’s just going to take some getting used to.”

Buck up, girl.

“I understand.” He paused. “Your family is so big, and mine is so small. Most of the time I cover for my deputies so they can be with their families on Christmas.”

“That’s so sad.” Her jaw sagged in surprise that she said it out loud, but her heart hurt for him. She knew he only had his mom and his grandparents, but she’d never really thought about it. Here she was, complaining because Mom wasn’t there to make Christmas special for *her* when he didn’t have much to look forward to in any given year. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean ...”

He shrugged his shoulders and propped his elbows on the table, speaking quietly. “It’s no big deal. It’s just the way things are. We spend Christmas Eve together, then it’s pretty much over for us.” He looked into her eyes. “But you? You deserve to have a special Christmas.”

She paused for a moment, caught in his gaze, feeling a little out of sorts. Was she really that petty? “No, I really don’t. I know I’m being a baby about it.”

She and Clay both heard the sleigh bells ring and glanced toward the door. Clay gave a nod and wave, and a smile crossed Mandy’s face when she saw her other boss, Darcy, rush in with a quick, “I’m back!”

“Better get busy. Thanks for listening, Clay. I’ll check on your order.”

“Any time, Mandy. I’m in no hurry.”